

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Essay Contest – 2006

First Prize: Caroline Sargent, The Bush School

Justice, freedom and equality for all, regardless of skin color was a dream shared by three important twentieth century African American leaders; Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Thurgood Marshall. What these inspirational figures didn't share was the method by which black Americans could achieve this historic vision. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was focused on peacefully changing hearts and minds for a more fair way of life. Malcolm X was committed to achieving this goal by powerfully asserting black pride through self help. Thurgood Marshall's means were different because they emphasized working through the legal system and gaining broad based civil rights through the courts, and the creation and enforcement of laws that would ensure all were treated equally.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of America's greatest leaders. He was born in Atlanta and was raised in a deeply religious family. Both his father and maternal grandfather were Baptist preachers. Dr. King was a very ambitious student who went to college at the age of 15. He initially thought about a career in medicine or law, but was inspired by his father to become a minister. Dr. King believed that man should have faith in God's guidance. He also believed that human beings were created equal and that people should not be treated differently because of the color of their skin. Dr. King was not the kind to assert his vision through violence and hostility. He focused on the basic goodness of people and tried to use positive means to change the feelings of all white Americans. One of Dr. Martin Luther King's most famous quotes is a good example of his approach: "I have a dream...that one day my children will not be known by the color of their skin but by the content of their character". Dr. King asked all Americans to share this dream, of not judging a book by its cover. Rather, he wanted people to focus on something deeper and more important...what's inside. His dream was to have all children be admired for something other than the color of their skin. He wanted them to be judged by their attitude and aptitude, for their qualities and for their integrity.

Malcolm X had a very different approach even though he still had the same dream. Malcolm X told his followers to go out and take what was rightfully theirs even if it couldn't be done peacefully. Malcolm X finally said, "Up, you mighty race; you can accomplish what you will". In this, he called upon all African Americans to unite and fight for fairness. He was famous for preaching that black Americans couldn't expect others to help them. The following quotation emphasizes this point. "You don't have a peaceful revolution. You don't have a turn the cheek revolution. There's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution!" Malcolm X was inspired by his father who was also a public speaker preaching about the unfair treatment of blacks in America. Malcolm's father died when he was only six years old, but the seed had been planted for Malcolm X's being an inspirational public speaker. He often spoke about how the black race needed to stand up for its rights and to not back down without a fight. Malcolm X knew that the task of achieving a fair and equal society for all was a very difficult one. He wanted black Americans to feel pride and assert their power and rights. Malcolm X wanted to go

down in history as the man who helped African Americans realize that they could save themselves.

Thurgood Marshall was another great American civil rights leader. He wanted to change the hearts and minds of the white Americans through the legal system by changing laws to help foster the equality of all American citizens. From the time he was young, he could sense the cruelty in the environment between whites and blacks. He set a personal goal of being either a lawyer or a judge so that he could influence the legal system in making it be illegal for minorities to be treated unfairly. Thurgood Marshall was born into racism. His grandfather was a slave and Thurgood always felt great pain for all African Americans who were involved with slavery. In 1930, Thurgood Marshall was denied an education at the University of Maryland Law School because he was black. He was taken aback at the racial comments that surrounded him. This is what brought him, like Malcolm X, to his destiny, in this instance, of becoming a Supreme Court justice and changing the lives of many Americans.

In the 20th century, there were many different views about racial differences and how to manage them. These three great visionaries had the leadership and communication skills that allowed them to make progress toward their goal of justice, equality and freedom for all. Martin Luther King Jr. was focused on changing the way people interacted by preaching to the people and starting peaceful marches for freedom. Malcolm X grew up watching his father preach to his fellow New Yorkers and felt that way wasn't very effective. Malcolm X decided that his approach would be the exact opposite of Dr. King's. He advocated a more violent way of reaching the people and getting their attention, saying that African Americans had had enough and weren't going to take any more. Thurgood Marshall, on the other hand, knew that the only way to ensure a change for these people was to pass laws that would bring power to all African Americans. While great advances have been made towards justice and equality, there is still a long way to go. What the last forty years have proven is that no single one of the three methods was entirely effective, but all three of them working together made important contributions toward the success that has been realized.

Bibliographic Citations

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